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DEATH UNDER THE SURFACE - CAPE FUR SEAL PREDATING ON A SOUTHERN GIANT PETREL IN WALVIS BAY, NAMIBIA

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Cape Fur Seals *Arctocephalus pusillus pusillus* have been observed to predate upon several species of endemic seabird in South Africa and Namibia, including Cape Gannets *Morus capensis*, Cape Cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis*, Bank Cormorants *P. neglectus*, Crowned Cormorants *P. coronatus* and African Penguins *Spheniscus demersus* (David *et al.* 2003, du Toit *et al.* 2004). Due to the high predation rate and small population sizes of several of these bird species, seal predation of seabirds can have negative impacts on the conservation status of these species (David *et al.* 2003, du Toit *et al*. 2004, Makhado *et al.* 2006).

The Cape Fur Seal population of South Africa and Namibia is relatively large and regarded as stable in numbers (Kirkman *et al.* 2007, 2012), but there has been a significant northwards shift in the distribution of the population with the establishment of several new colonies in northern Namibia and southern Angola (Kirkman *et al.* 2012). Pelican Point, on the western side of Walvis Bay, Namibia is a

Fig 1 - Southern Giant Petrel approaching a kayak on 10 August 2010. Note string/line entangled around right wing.

mainland based, non-breeding colony that has grown rapidly in recent years. Fewer than 10 pups per year were born at Pelican Point until the mid-1990s when breeding animals first settled there, but pup production has increased to ~ 1 700 in 2006 to > 12 000 at the last aerial census in December 2011 (MFMR unpubl. data).

Both Southern *Macronectes giganteus* and Northern (*M. halli* Giant Petrels are regular visitors to the coast of southern Africa where they scavenge around commercial fishing boats and at seal colonies (Sinclair & Ryan 2010). Opportunistic observations by the author (SE) made during > 1 000 hours of boat-based surveys for dolphins predominantly during winter (June to August) suggest that the number of giant petrels observed at Pelican Point have increased

Fig 2 - Southern Giant Petrel during attack by the Cape fur seal on 14 August 2012. Note position of bites on lower body suggesting bird was attacked from beneath.

since 2008 when dolphin surveys began. The increase in sightings may be linked to the increasing size of the seal colony, and associated carrion available here.

At 08:12 on 14 August 2012, an adult male Cape Fur Seal was observed to attack, kill and partially consume a juvenile Southern Giant Petrel at Pelican Point, Walvis Bay. This is the first observation of a seal predation on any seabird species that the author (SE) has made in the Walvis Bay area since 2008.

The initial capture was not observed, but probably took place from below the bird as it sat on the water surface. The initial bites were to the rump and belly of the bird and the seal disembowelled and killed the bird by thrashing it back and forth on the water surface. The kill and eating of the bird took place in less than 15 minutes after which the seal departed. The carcass was then recovered and inspected. The entire gut and tissues from the belly, breast and upper wing were missing, presumably eaten, but the leg muscles were intact although exposed. Thus, the bird was clearly eaten and not merely killed as 'play' as has been observed in southern Namibia at Ichaboe Island (du Toit *et al.* 2004).

The Petrel that had been eaten was almost certainly an injured animal that have been seen in the vicinity of Pelican Point since early August (exact date unavailable). The bird had had an unidentified (but not fishing monofilament) rope or line entangled around its right wing, which had prevented it from flying. The bird had approached boats (including kayaks) and been fed by local marine tour operators and was observed (author JM) to have been harassed by seal pups pulling its tail feathers. The bird was captured and disentangled by Francois du Toit of Open Water Kayak Tours on 11 August 2012, but was still unable to fly when released due to the depth of the injury on the wing. Given that it was not observed to fly on the 14 August either, it is likely the bird was still incapacitated by its wing injury on this date, thus providing easy prey for a seal.

The majority of seal predation on seabirds observed to date takes place around bird colonies and is mainly effected by juvenile or adult male seals (David *et al.* 2003, du Toit *et al*. 2004, Makhado *et al.* 2006), however the bulk of the seal population in Namibia does not seem to be consuming any significant number of seabirds (Mecenero *et al*. 2005).

Fig 3 - Cape fur seal in the process of killing the southern giant petrel.

Pelican Point does not hold any breeding colonies of bird species typically taken by Fur Seals. However, large numbers of Cape Cormorants that nest on the man-made guano platform ~10km east of Pelican Point regularly roost on the beaches in the vicinity of the Pelican Point seal colony and form rafts at sea, providing potential prey for seals. The feeding of seals by marine tour operators in Walvis Bay probably encourages some individual seals not to forage out at sea and seek food in the vicinity of the tour boats instead. This practice might create conditions reinforcing the predatory behaviour of seals on seabirds in Walvis Bay.

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Fig 4 - Remains of southern giant petrel which were retrieved after the Cape Fur Seal departed. Note missing gut and flesh from breast and belly.